

YLEM JOURNAL

\$7.00

BRITISH
SCIENCE
FICTION
BOOM

Interviews with:

Richard Calder

Jon Courtenay Grimwood

China Mieville

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I want to start off this editorial by thanking Torrey Nommesen for his three years service laying out the YLEM Journal. Torrey brought creativity and a sense of adventure to the process of making the material fit the format, and remarkable patience and forbearance in the face of my last-minute textual emendations. He was a stickler for high-quality images, and contributed some images of his own to serve as Journal covers. Torrey continues to branch out in the range and depth of his artistic endeavors, and continues to be a pillar of YLEM. And I want to welcome the YLEM Journal's new layout expert, Henry Warwick. Torrey and I were introduced to Henry by Christina McPhee at the opening of the Recombinant Flux show at San Francisco's RX Gallery last July. Henry expresses himself in both the visual and aural arts, and has been a professional graphic designer for several years. He will be participating in McPhee's YLEM Forum November 10th, and recently received his MFA in Interdisciplinary Art from Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont.

I first heard of the British "boom" in science fiction at the ConJose World Science Fiction Convention in San Jose, CA in 2002. I pestered everyone I met for recommendations of important emerging writers, and noticed that most of the names I heard were British. And I picked up a copy of *Locus*, the fanzine, and saw that there was an interview with the name I'd heard most often, China Mieville. For reasons I can't identify, I was fascinated by this guy, and I bought his latest novel, *The Scar*, for list price, something I rarely do. Then I saw that China would be signing in person at the Con, and I found myself missing Vernor Vinge's Singularity presentation to stand in line for half an hour to get China's autograph, something I never do. China turned out to be as charming as everyone who has met him says he is, and he inscribed the book with a quote from Joseph Conrad, "The sea has never been friendly to man."

When I found myself planning a trip to London last November, I contacted China to ask him for an interview, but he told me that he would be incommunicado at that time due to the upcoming deadline for his latest novel, *Iron Council*. So I contacted another British writer whose work I had discovered at ConJose, Richard Calder, who agreed to be interviewed in London. Coincidentally, the latest issue of the academic journal *Science Fiction Studies* had just arrived, and it was titled THE BRITISH SF BOOM. The magazine postulated a renaissance in British science fiction comparable to that manifested in the pages of the magazine *New Worlds* under the editorship of Michael Moorcock from 1964 to 1968, and which came to be called the New Wave. I took this issue of *Science Fiction Studies* to my favorite science fiction bookstore, Borderlands of San Francisco, and there discovered the work of Jon Courtenay Grimwood, which I also bought for list price.

I interviewed Richard and Jon in the café of my hotel in London, where the biggest breakfasts I had ever encountered were served, complete with bangers. It was reasonably quiet there at mid-day, except for the occasional crashing of plates. Both Richard and Jon have lovely speaking voices, which made transcribing their tapes a pleasure. I bought a new digital recorder for backup, but discovered that it only recorded for 45 minutes at the high-quality mode, which meant I could only use it for Richard's interview.

Then recently I heard that China had completed *Iron Council* and would be in San Francisco on a book tour. I met up with him at the Prescott Hotel, where I had interviewed Samuel Delany in his suite. China wanted to get together in the pub next door instead, which was holding Happy Hour in a big way. We were waited on by a comely Englishwoman, and when China asked her for English Breakfast tea, she said "We haven't got any," so he settled for American tea, and I had my usual Coca Cola. Before the tape started, I asked China if he had had a chance to read the March/April issue of the *YLEM Journal* I'd sent him. He replied that he had, and had been very flattered that Samuel Delany had said kind things about his work. I pointed out that Greg Bear and David Brin had also praised him in that issue, and he told me how fortunate he felt that his books were being received so positively.

Richard Calder's web page is www.richardcalder.net. Richard has published nine novels of what has been described as "gorgeous, supercharged prose." The first three novels, *Dead Girls* (1992), *Dead Boys* (1994), and *Dead Things* (1996), form a trilogy dealing with perverse children, some of whom having become automata. The next two novels, *Cythera* (1998) and *Frenzetta* (1998) continue with demonic children, seductresses constructed from light, and reanimated corpses. *The Twist* (1999) is something of a space Western, with an evil little girl protagonist. *Malignos* (2000) and *Lord Soho* (2002) feature as protagonist Richard Pike, described as a "human warrior and demon-slayer in a far-future world gone rotten with biological monstrosities." And *Impakto* (2001) is set in the present day, but branches out to the multiverse. The last three of these novels have not yet been published in the US.

Jon Courtenay Grimwood's web page is www.j-cg.co.uk/index.htm. His current bibliography includes two trilogies and one ringer. The first trilogy, consisting of *Neoaddix* (1997), *Lucifer's Dragon* (1998), and *reMix* (1999), postulate an alternate history in which Paris is the seat of a new Napoleonic dynasty populated by cyborgs and a silver female assassin named Razz. The next novel, *redRobe* (2000), treats a male assassin, Axl, whose gun is smarter than he is. The later trilogy, *Pashazade* (2001), *Effendi* (2002), and *Felaheen* (2003), treat an alternate history in a liberal Ottoman Empire, whose protagonist is the chameleon-like Ashraf Bey. Like Iain M. Banks, Jon is extremely popular in the UK, but is not yet as well-known in the US. He also writes a monthly book review column for the *The Guardian*.

China Mieville is the author of four novels. The first, *King Rat* (1998) is set in London, dealing with the supernatural in the context of the drum n' bass phenomenon. The next three novels, *Perdido Street Station* (2000), *The Scar* (2002), and *Iron Council* (2004) deal with various parts of a fictional place called Bas Lag. China has a doctorate in political economics, and has stood for Parliament for the Socialist Alliance. He has won Philip K. Dick award for *King Rat*, and the Arthur C. Clarke and British Fantasy Awards for *Perdido Street Station*. China's webpage is <http://runagate-rampant.netflums.com>.

YLEM FORUM

LOCATION! LOCATION! LOCATION!

Three Projects in Locative Media by California Artists

Presented for the YLEM Forum at the San Francisco Exploratorium, November 10, 2004

FMI: Christina McPhee christina112@earthlink.net

Slipstreamkonza

www.christinamcphree.net

Christina McPhee with sound collaboration by **Henry Warwick**

In development for installation in 2005/6, Slipstreamkonza is a sonic topology that remediates carbon absorption and release data from the tallgrass prairie, as if to recreate the 'breathing' of the planet during global climate change. Christina McPhee is a landscape artist working with digital print and video installation/performance painting, and location based sound design. Her next exhibition is at Transport Gallery in LA in January 2005, on a series called naxsmash/merz_city (www.naxsmash.net). Her work has recently shown in London, Weimar, Melbourne and San Francisco. Henry Warwick, at home in digital imaging and electronic sound, develops data/ sound topologies. He produced the San Francisco Performance Cinema Symposium (2003) and makes work about the interface of catastrophe and technology. He is a board member of YLEM.

Remote Location 1:100,000

<http://www.paintersflat.net/remotelocation.html>

Paula Poole and Brett Stalbaum

Created during August 2004, Box Elder County, Utah, Remote Location 1:100,000 binds together data about landscape and the landscape as data, using GPS influenced tiles, soil samples, paintings and photo documentation. The project is sponsored by the Center for Land Use Interpretation. Paula Poole is adapting landscape painting traditions to new media. She centers on the landscape of the Great Basin desert of North America. Brett Stalbaum is a C5 research theorist and software development artist. He cofounded Electronic Disturbance Theater and collaborates with Paula Poole on land/walking/GPS/locative/performance/pictorial works.

"34 north 118 west"

<http://34N118W.net/>

Jeremy Hight, Jeff Knowlton and Naomi Spellman

"34 north 118 west" uses gps data and interactive map that triggers live data through movement in downtown LA. "34 north 118 west" premiered November 15, 2002 at the Art in Motion Festival. It won the grand jury prize at Aim IV in 2003 <<http://www.usc.edu/dept/matrix/aim/aimIV/>> Jeremy Hight is a writer fascinated by the weather<<http://thepharmakon.org/RightAsRain/>> and 'agitated space'. Naomi Spellman works in locative media, networked narrative, and is Artist in Residence at the Media Centre, Huddersfield, U.K.,<http://project_diary.blogspot.com/> Jeff Knowlton's "a text for the navigational age", was shown at VRML Art 2000 and Siggraph2000. Also at Huddersfield, UK, Jeff has worked with Naomi to design an 'interpretive engine' for various places on earth, which uses wireless APs in New York to determine more generalised locations. Its debut is in October 2004 at Spectropolis: Mobile Media, Art and the City, NYC <http://www.spectropolis.info/>

YLEM ANNOUNCEMENTS

Julie Newdoll has announced her participation in the December 3 - 11, 2005 Biennale Internazionale dell'Arte Contemporanea. She was chosen by the International Scientific Committee of the Florence Biennale to participate in the upcoming 2005 exhibit.

From July 5 - October 8, she had her "Myths and Molecules" exhibit at Stanford University, the Institute for Research on Women and Gender

November 1 to November 29th, 2004, **Grant Johnson** will be exhibiting his work at the Canessa Gallery, 708 Montgomery Street, San Francisco, CA 94111. Hours: Monday - Friday, 11am - 4pm for more information: www.canessa.org

October 14, 2004 - February 6, 2005 at the Seeing Gallery, "Art Life". Featuring works by **Brian Knep, Golan Levin, Casey Reas, and Scott Snibbe**. *Our understanding of the distinctions between the "natural" and "artificial" worlds is changing rapidly. Technological advances are leading to machines that are more and more autonomous, reactive, and lifelike, blurring the boundaries between the living and the nonliving and calling into question our relationships with other entities. The artists behind these interactive works are exploring this exciting and unsettling territory with pieces that challenge viewers to reconsider their notions of life, to reflect on the meanings of terms like "real" and "artificial," and to ponder the differences between using a machine and interacting with another being.* Exploratorium, at the Palace of Fine Arts, 3601 Lyon Street, San Francisco, CA 94123 for more info: www.exploratorium.edu

INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD CALDER

—Loren Means

LM: What are you working on now?

RC: My next novel is called *Babylon*, and will be published next year by PS Publishing.

LM: Is your new book along the same lines as what you've been doing?

RC: I think I'm the kind of writer that doesn't exactly break off into completely new territory with every book. There are certain writers that I suppose have been an influence on me, like J. G. Ballard, William Burroughs, who write about a very individual, personal kind of world. They make a mythology out of their imaginations which is particularly personal. I think I'm a similar kind of writer, so no book is an entirely new departure. It has a kind of undercurrent which probably will be readily identified as me. But apart from that, this thing I've been working on is more studied. It's actually in large part an historical novel, something I've not done before. So it's taken quite a bit of historical research, particularly late nineteenth century. Which I've enjoyed doing. It's been something of an adventure, because of that. I rather enjoyed having this objective area of historical facts, themes, to project myself onto, rather than just conjure something up from inside myself.

LM: Is it an alternate history?

RC: Yes. It's not a departure in terms of writing a so-called "mainstream" novel. Though I've never had any qualms or problems with boundaries between science fiction and mainstream. It just never occurs to me. I write the way I do, and I get classified as a science fiction or fantasy writer because I enjoy incorporating science fictional or fantasy themes, but I don't start off from the point of view that I want to write a science fiction or fantasy novel. Perhaps that's been to my detriment over the years, in that I'm not a tremendously commercially successful writer. I don't easily fit into a slot.

LM: It seems to me that in America there is a very strong division between science fiction and fantasy. I think the hard science fiction writers feel that the fantasy writers are doing much better than they are financially. I know fantasy writers who have whole shelves in the bookstores for their work.

RC: I think we need to make a distinction here between fantasy with a small "f" and Fantasy with a large "F". Upper-case Fantasy. Genre Fantasy, or genre writing in general. A lot of people get confused about the fantastic or fantasy in writers such as Borges, Angela Carter, and so on. They immediately think that these are Fantasy writers, or science fiction writers, when they're writers who are doing their own thing, and are merely incorporating fantasy, the fantastical, science fiction elements into their work as they see fit. They're not constrained by genre. They don't write within parameters. They don't particularly care about parameters. They have their own, personal vision. And that's what I've always been very concerned about. Being faithful to the imagination, being faithful to a personal vision, not worrying too much about genre parameters. That's another writer I admire, Angela Carter. I do admire those writers who simply go about writing a book as they want to write it. They may be writers that are influenced by and enjoy science fiction, or even Fantasy with a capital "F", genre



Photo credit: Jimmie Wing

Fantasy, but don't write within its parameters, and are not concerned about its parameters. Concerned about an individual, personal vision, concerned about their individual imagination.

LM: The main thing I notice about your work is the very deep use of language. I find myself having to reread sentences sometimes because there's such a richness to them. It seems to me that that's not necessarily the main concern of many science fiction writers.

RC: No, indeed. There are different kinds of vices we all have in writing. One vice you could well see is purple prose. I certainly have something of an addiction to that vice. And it has its dangers and its difficulties. There are certain vices and certain conventions, certain knee-jerk reactions about what a prose style should be, that becomes particularly evident in the science fiction community. "Transparent prose." I'm never quite sure what that means. There can obviously only be good writing and bad writing. Transparent prose, purple prose, it matters not a jot in the end unless it's interesting.

LM: I think Simenon and Highsmith are examples of people who tried to write as though they had no style, which is very difficult.

RC: Well, it's a style in itself. It's "writing degree zero." Contemporary writers in the field, such as Geoff Ryman, have a very lucid style, which I greatly enjoy. But it's very studied, it's very practiced. Someone like Christopher Priest has a very clear, limpid style. But it is far more studied than people would initially believe or even like to believe. I think that most people would like to believe that any writing is easy, or can be easy. To make a personal style is really quite difficult, and fraught with dangers.

LM: I was attracted to your work because of the ambiguities and multiple meanings, and the fact that you tend to jump about in time and space—all the things that the mainstream novel theoretically wouldn't do. That's what you start out doing.

RC: I'm always interested in writing that is fantastical, that breaks different boundaries. That is, though it's a rather over-used word, "experimental." "Experimental" has rather a bad cachet to it. It's thought of as being sometimes needlessly experimental for the sake of a pose, I suppose. As I said before, my main concern is always to be interesting. That is part of the experiment. As you said, jumping around time and space, the nature of the language itself, for me, that's a way of using language, using narrative, or trying to use it, to make it in some way a spectacle. Drama that is at the same time spectacle, and draw in the reader in terms of engaging their interest.

LM: You also use elements of the thriller, elements of violence.

RC: One of the things I've always liked about science fiction and fantasy is its schlock elements. That's one thing that attracts me about genre writing in general—its popular schlock elements. One of my favorite science fiction films is a film that's not usually considered to be a science fiction film. It's Godard's *Alphaville*. That's an avant-garde director using popular, schlock elements, pop-art elements, pop-culture elements, in a free-and-easy way. He does it exactly in his own way. It's not a science fiction. We can see all of the science-fictional elements in it. It's a Godard film. Just as Borges, if he's writing a science-fiction-like story, it's never a science fiction story. It's a Borgesian narrative. This is going back again to what I am concerned about, fulfilling a personal, individual vision, like Godard does in *Alphaville*. That's one of the things that draws me to genre writing in general. The thriller, crime writing, as well. In terms of using those things, using them in a personal way.

LM: Also the element of the child's sensibility, juvenile delinquency. For some reason I've been thinking lately about a scene from John Malkovich's film *The Dancer Upstairs*, where Julio Bardem is trying to comfort a little girl assassin who has been shot, and there's gore all over her school uniform. She reminded me a bit of your character Primavera from *Dead Girls*.

RC: A film I want to see and still haven't seen is *Kill Bill*, which so I believe uses similar cartoon-like elements, manga elements. I've always been quite interested in the child's-eye view kind of novel. I like Proust, the first. I like *Swann's Way* and *Within a Budding Grove*. Which is very much about seeing things through the eyes of an adolescent. And also the child's perspective in terms of the more feral elements of being a child. The darker aspects of play and game. *Lord of the Flies* sort of thing. I always quite remember certain treatments of *Alice in Wonderland*. There was one by Jonathan Miller that was quite dark. It sort of had the whole of *Wonderland* as a kind of Victorian madhouse. And there was that take on *Alice in Wonderland* by the Czech, Jan Svankmajer, which is also a rather dark, perverse look at what is a standard Victorian children's book which we all

grew up reading. I like that take on things. The childhood world that is a little bit skewed, kind of a dark Victorian feel of things. A large influence for me has been symbolism, decadence, Surrealism. If you look at a lot of the literary, artistic preoccupations of the Symbolists and the Decadents, they're looking back to early eighteenth-century. Sort of reviving Couperin's fete galante world. This kind of toyshop world. Magic music-box world. Lending a peculiarly dark, strange, twisted edge. Think of the Goncourts, or Verlaine, Wilde, Beardsley. They all seem strangely childlike in their approach and their vision. It's a childlike, magic-toyshop world that's got this strange, twisted quality to it. I grew up reading a lot of these people as an adolescent, as a teenager, and it stayed with me. I find it interesting and exciting, and I suppose that's something I've tried to explore in my writing.

LM: I understand that in Britain everyone as a child watched Dr. Who.

RC: Particularly people my age. I remember the first time it was broadcast. I was seven years old. Never seen it before, not knowing what to expect. The very first ones were very amateurishly done, they were all made in black-and-white with strange sound effects. William Hartnell played the first Dr. Who. I believe the way it started off, the way the characters were introduced, it all starts off in a school. Again, the childhood scene, because it was a child's television program. At seven years old it really had a very profound effect on me. It was frightening and fascinating. I was a huge fan as a boy. I was one of these people that it kind of stayed with into adulthood. I prefer remembering it as a childhood experience. In terms of an early influence, a powerful one.

LM: My sons were both always attracted to horror films and then violent computer games, and my wife, who is a psychotherapist, was quite troubled by this.

RC: We're all very conscious of this, not just now, but over the last one hundred years. It's particularly relevant to people who write fantasy or read fantasy with a small "f", not genre Fantasy, or the fantastical, or are interested in fantasy. We live in a world of fantasy now, post-Freud. Freud, I've always thought, was one of the great seminal writers of the last one hundred years, because he has described man as the animal who fantasizes. Not the animal who speaks, not the animal with language, not the animal who makes, all of which are quite valid descriptions of human beings, but mankind is defined as the animal who fantasizes, who has this fantasy life of violence, sexuality, dark things, death-affirming things. All quite frightening and disturbing, and no doubt—I don't have children, but for anybody with children living post-Freud, we're of course all obsessed with this.

The knowledge that we are not just people who fantasize, we've always known that, but we are defined by it. It's what makes us what we are. I think it's a problematic area, how our imaginations affect our day-to-day lives, and how they don't. How we handle things, how we handle our imaginations. But it always seems to me that it's people with no imaginations, or poor imaginations, who indulge in violence in the real world, in physical violence. It seems to be the repressed people. Violence, spitefulness, viciousness, maliciousness, always seems to be coupled with poverty of imagination. People who are rich in imagination, have rich internal lives, rich inner lives, rich interiority, fantasy lives, seem to be decent characters, so I've always found.

LM: It seems to me that one of the things that makes Artificial Intelligence problematic is imagination, emotion, dreaming...

RC: ...or to use a more clichéd form, the soul. That's a very problematic term. I would use it poetically, and not use the term scientifically. The soul in the machine, the ghost in the machine. Where is it? You can't put your finger on it. It's not the problem of consciousness. There's a doppelganger in there.

LM: I'm hearing that there's a "boom" in British science fiction. Is that affecting you?

RC: Not really, no. I don't quite know what this "boom" is. There is certainly a lot of space opera being written at the moment, which always strikes me as exceedingly strange, because it is very retrogressive. There are a lot of writers who can write well, and write imaginatively, who are choosing to write space opera. I can only presume because it's felt that it will sell. I feel that there is a commercial imperative to it. Otherwise I can't really understand why writers that can write well, a lot of them have solid science backgrounds as well, should simply wish to continually write space opera. It's basically a kind of 1950s genre form. You could argue that they're doing it in different ways, but how many different ways can you write about what basically is a kind of *Star Trek* or *Star Wars* universe? Even if you're doing it in more sophisticated ways, it's quite limited.

LM: I've been hearing that the difference between fantasy and hard science fiction is that fantasy doesn't have to resemble the real world, and hard science fiction is supposed to extrapolate from the real world...

RC: Well, it begs the argument of any book reflecting the real world. This is a bit of an old structuralist, post-structuralist argument, but basically books reflect other books, they don't reflect the real world at all. Space opera reflects other space opera. That's what it's all about. It's quoting space opera novels from the past and redoing them. You might argue that with some writers it's being done in a more sophisticated way, it's better written. But I don't really think it's reflecting the world at all, in that respect. If you're looking for novels that reflect the world, the last place you would go to is genre writing, and particularly science fiction or fantasy genre writing. I can't think of many science fiction books—with some notable exceptions—that really do reflect a feeling of what's going on in the world at all. William Gibson does, and he is a science fiction writer, but he's also a writer who has both redefined the genre and is doing something outside the genre as well.

LM: I asked him if he was going to write a space opera, and he said, "I'm not a science fiction writer, I'm a William Gibson writer."

RC: This is the point I was starting off on, really. Writers who want to write well and imaginatively, or at least to the best of their ability, which is what we should all be trying to do, shouldn't really think in genre terms. They should think in terms of their own imaginations. "What does my imagination want to say, how is it going to come out on the printed page? How can I use language to body forth various things from my imagination in an effective way?" Not "I'm going to use space and I've got to incorporate some kind of new warp drive into it. I've got to read the *New Scientist* or *Scientific American* to get the new ideas." All that's all very well and good, but don't let it be a primary concern.

LM: In America we have science fiction writers who are also scientists, like Isaac Asimov, who wrote both hard science fiction and hard science books, and Rudy Rucker.

RC: I like Rudy Rucker, but I would say that he is a writer who simply writes Rudy Rucker books. I particularly like him because he is idiosyncratic. There is a good hard scientific basis to his novels, but it is completely un-intrusive. He has this strange cartoonish-imagination way of looking at things. I like his sense of humor, I like his prose style. I like the way he does things.

LM: Sometimes Rucker's prose style seems to be approaching the concept of "writing degree zero".

RC: Yes, sometimes his style is like a graphic novel without the pictures. It's done in that quick, smart, jivey sort of way. You almost imagine there should be pictures there. He should be writing a graphic novel.

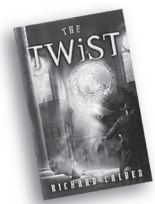
LM: I've been enjoying Greg Bear's novels dealing with nanotechnology and sentient evolution. In his case the science seems to drive the story.

RC: There's all manner of ways in which a story can be driven, and it comes down to that individual writer. I like ideas-driven stories. I don't do them. But some of the classic stories—H. G. Wells' novels all have a classic strong idea behind each one. What would it be like to travel through time? What would happen if someone became invisible? It all starts off from a clear idea-like premise and is driven solely by that.

LM: Didn't Wells go through a period where he was pessimistic about technology, then another period where he was optimistic about it, then ended his life pessimistic again?

RC: I find it quite interesting, particularly in Wells' context, how utopias and dystopias are infinitely interchangeable, become interchangeable over time, according to our perspective. Wells' idea of a utopia would be based on eugenics, which we now see as dystopian. A lot of his ideas—he was a man of his time, of course—and he felt in the 1890s, like so many other thinking people, that society and the race was degenerating. There were many influences—a blot, not on our genes, because we didn't have that kind of language in the 1890s, but on our blood. Many kind of proto-fascist ideas circulating there, which were seen as utopian at the time. And of course when they were later put into practice by politicians in the next century, they were seen to be extremely dystopian. That would lead me on to what I see as the nature of fantasy, really, and the purpose of how a writer handles fantasy. Fantasy seems particularly pernicious when it leaves the realm of art. It can be pathological. I think probably all fantasy is pathological, in that human beings are pathological. But when it enters the realm of art and gets treated in the realm of art, it seems to find its right place. When we don't make art out of fantasy, that's when it enters the realm of politics, and it's the world at large. And that's when it becomes troublesome. So two cheers at least for writers who can use that human predilection for the dark thoughts and for fantasizing in the correct way, or in a better way than politicians.

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JON COURTENAY GRIMWOOD

—Loren Means

LM: I'd like to talk with you about the state of British science fiction.

JCG: I think something really interesting has been happening with British science fiction in the last four or five years. In fact, I was talking to an American editor who said that he and his colleagues had been so busy looking at what was happening in Australia in science fiction, that they missed the whole renaissance of British science fiction. It was about eighteen months after this New New Wave started that they picked up on the fact that things were changing.

What's changed is that we're going head-to-head with "serious" novelists. On that basis, the papers and radio and television have started to treat us seriously. To an extent, I think we had to take a step back and say "The things that work in good novels are characterization and plot development and background. We have to keep all of the things we do as science fiction writers, but we also have to add all the things that mainstream writers do as well. So our characters have got to be rounded, they've got to develop, our plots have got to follow the necessities of story development."

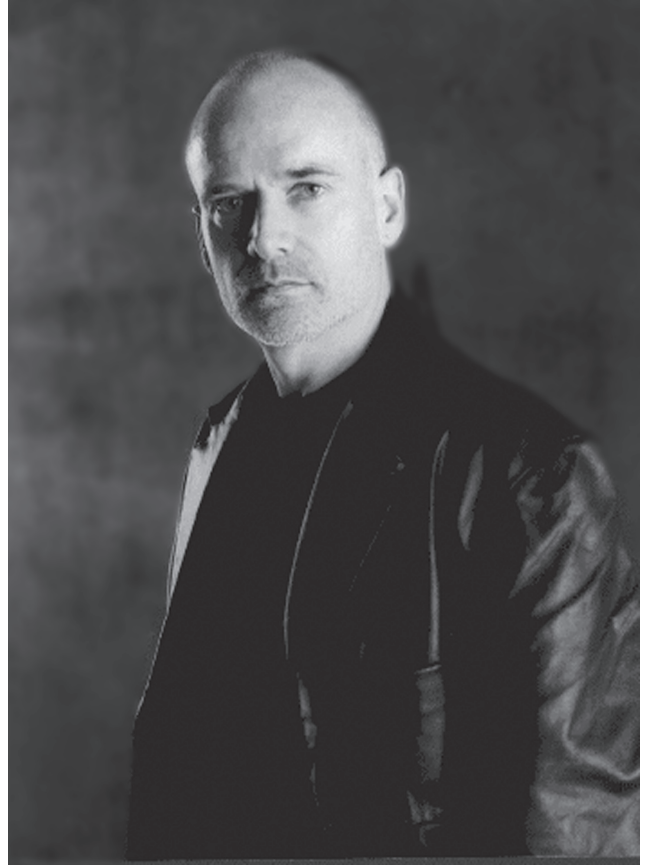
In some strange way, by all of us walking around and pretending that we're terribly grown up, the newspapers have started treating us as if we're grown up. Therefore, you get things like the *Telegraph* and the *Guardian* dealing with science fiction in a way they didn't five or ten years ago. There have always been fantastically good books written within science fiction. It's not that this has changed, it's that the baseline has been pulled over the last five years. I think M. John Harrison has quite a lot of influence on this. He is a very big influence on China Mieville, and I think that China's *Perdido Street Station* was a major step in what's happening with science fiction in Britain at the moment. There's a term much overused in the last few years, which is "New Weird". I have no idea what it means. I think it probably means more or less what we want it to mean.

LM: How do you think British science fiction differs from American SF?

JCG: The base level of American science fiction is essentially written from a right-wing perspective, and British science fiction is essentially written from the perspective of the left. We in Britain are all of a generation that either grew up in or went through the Thatcher years, so we all have a memory of bits of society being peeled away. And I think that comes out very strongly in the current round of writers. If you take the top new writers, you find that everyone has a lot of similar concerns. It might come out in very different ways. China might deal with it very differently to the way somebody else would deal with it.

LM: Who are these top writers?

JCG: I think Alastair Reynolds has done some very clever things. He's managed to mesh very good writing with a very hard science knowledge, using his own background. China's obviously important. Justina Robson, who has developed almost exponentially from her first novel. If you look at the progression in writing between her books it's phenomenal the learning curve she's been taking.



LM: I find in your work and Richard Calder's an engagement with evil which I don't necessarily find in American science fiction.

JCG: Do we engage with evil? Yes, of course we do—it's what novels do. If we're not engaging with evil, we're not engaging with anything else. I'm not sure I can separate evil out from everything else in a novel. I never sit down and think, "I'm going to write a novel about evil." There are some characters whose actions are evil. They may also be quite sympathetic characters in many other ways. Just as I have, I hope, characters who are essentially good, but whose actions can sometimes hurt themselves and quite often can damage other people. It's the shades of gray that I think are so important, and it's sometimes, I think, the shades of gray that I find missing in the American science fiction novels I get sent to review. There's quite often a sense that the good guys are good, the hero gets the woman, rescues the puppy, saves the universe. Whereas in British science fiction the puppy will die and the woman will probably get saved by another woman and they'll all go off into the sunset together and the guy will go have a drink.

LM: As opposed to a noir story, in which the woman is very, very evil.

JCG: Oh yeah, the whole Philip K. Dick thing about the endless round of betrayal.

LM: I think of American science fiction as more science-idea driven than British science fiction.

JCG: There is probably more hard science in American science fiction, and it is driven by a thought process taking a piece of science and then extrapolating things from that piece of science. Whereas I would suggest that in British science fiction, we're taking a piece of science and extrapolating the effect of that piece of science on society, so the piece of science may not be mentioned, or it may be mentioned only in passing. I don't know if you've read my Ashraf Bey books...

LM: Sure. In those books it's assumed that we're in an alternate history in an alternate time period, but we're here on Earth, we're not in space somewhere, and we're not necessarily going to dealing with the latest technological advance. Your conscious gun is a technological advance, but it's basically another character in the story, and character is the important thing.

JCG: You're talking about the talking gun in *RedRobe*. I wanted a sidekick who was more intelligent than the hero. It just turned out that the intelligent sidekick was his gun. In the end the gun drives the book, because it's much brighter than Axl. I desperately want to go back and write another Axl book. *RedRobe* was an updating of Stanley J. Weyman's *Under the Red Robe*, which was a classic Victorian high-drama novel. I wanted to take that and do it for the late Twentieth Century, but set in the Twenty-second Century. It's back to that thing of the hero not riding away with the heroine, but the heroine going off with another heroine and Axl basically ending up in thrall to the Cardinal, as he has been in thrall to the Cardinal for his entire life.

LM: And this conjuring with time and character continues in the Ashraf Bey books.

JCG: The Ashraf Bey books came out of a couple of conflicting desires. I wanted to write straight crime novels that filled the crime template completely. They had to be stand-alone murder mysteries in which a detective solves the murder. That was the first thing I wanted to do. The second thing I wanted to was, I wanted to look at what would happen if the American President had brokered a peace deal between London and Berlin in 1915 and 1916 when the First World War could still have been held in check and had still not completely gone out of control. So what I did was, I had the American President broker a deal whereby the First World War essentially remained the Third Balkan Conflict, and was resolved. (This almost happened, this came fantastically close to happening. It was London that stopped it, because at that point the UK was losing slightly to Germany, and the deal couldn't be done. But I wanted to look at what would happen if the deal was accomplished.)

It seemed to me that one of the things to happened would be that the Ottoman Empire might not disintegrate. It had been weakening for a hundred and fifty years, but at some point the oil fields of Arabia would come into play, and if those came into play, they would provide enough money for the Ottoman Empire to become effectively a world power. The Middle East and North Africa would remain Ottoman, and the whole structure would be underpinned by money from the oil fields and Arabia. A particular class in Islamic society that was developing at that point, which has not developed in recent years, would remain. I have two photographs from about 1910. One of them shows a



Turkish Muslim family in Istanbul, and the other shows an English family in Croydon, which is near London. They are essentially the same photograph. There is a father in his suit with a high collar. There is a mother in a long dress that flows around her feet. There are rows of neatly-dressed children in approximations of their mothers and fathers. And there are nannies, and servants, dressed in almost identical uniforms in the background. What you essentially have is two upper-middle-class families from about 1910, separated across continents and across religions, but united in their aspirations. I wanted to deal with a world where that confidence had not been broken, where the First World War had not cracked up the Ottoman Empire. Obviously it's a way of dealing with what is happening now in the Middle East and North Africa by looking at something else, and then you can look sideways at it. I wanted to write a series where we look at us by looking at someone else. What I wanted to write was a liberal Islamic society.

In the Ashraf Bey books the powers are the old European blocks of Germany and France, and to a much lesser extent the UK. America is very powerful but separatist and almost isolationist, although beginning not to be. A liberal Islamic belt across North Africa, and then a far more fundamentalist Islam belt to the south of the Sahara. So what you have in terms of the problems within Islam, you have between moderate Islam and fundamentalist Islam, almost in the way one has recently with Turkey. I wanted this to be writ very, very large, and to do that I had to have Ashraf Bey, who is, like most of my characters, from no particular country, no particular place. He has been in prison in Seattle. He comes into El Iskandryia knowing nothing about North Africa, nothing about Ottoman society, nothing about the city. He's set up with a marriage to a good local girl who, because she has been to university in New York, is already regarded as a bit of a troublemaker by her family. So everybody regards these two as being ideally suited. It's just ways of looking at society. The reason I made Raf a detective is that it allows him to strip back the history of the city at the same time as he strips out clues for the crime.

LM: In one of your interviews you said, "Because ideas about genetic technology have replaced cybernetics, the future is going to be wetware rather than hardware." You were talking about William Gibson.

JCG: Yes, I was, and I love Gibson. It was Gibson who brought me back to SF. I'd read SF as a child and into my teens, and then I'd stopped. And then I read the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* books by Douglas Adams, which were fantastic, and very funny, but I'm not sure they were actually science fiction, I think they were social satire. Then, more or less with my marriage collapsing around me, I sat down in a café, down on the South Coast, and read William Gibson. I just thought, "This is unbelievably good!" This guy is so good because he's taken classic hard-boiled fiction tropes and he's bolted on the whole fantastically attractive overlay of interfacing with machines. That whole Eighties thing of being part of a machine. Just plugging in and being able to fly a helicopter. Plugging in and being able to speak Finnish. Plugging in a sense of history. It's enormously attractive.

But I think it was part of our relationship with machinery at that point. We were all just discovering computers. We were all thinking about not even the Internet, but Bulletin Boards. For us it was huge, it was wonderful, it was like my grandparents seeing their first car. When my grandmother bought her first car, she stopped and shook hands with the people in a car coming on the opposite side on the road. They stopped because they both had cars and they introduced themselves and shook hands and said, "Aren't they fun?" and off they drove. That stuff has become invisible to us. In the same way, that layer of computer has become almost transparent. I watched a very small boy, he was about two or three, walk across the room, climb up onto a chair, and hit F2 or something to log onto something. I thought "That is like going to the fridge and getting your juice out. There is no more thought to it than that."

And at the same time, the whole genetics thing has been happening, the unraveling of the genome, the whole idea of backing out genes. And everybody suddenly realized that we weren't all going to have metal implants, and we weren't all going to have crystal memory bolted onto the back of our skulls. We were probably at some point going to have, on a very basic level, diseases bred out of our children, and then levels of intelligence bred in. From the point of view of writers, we stopped thinking in terms of cyborgs and we started thinking in terms of people who have genetically-modified powers. Mind you, you're no different to writers a couple of hundred years ago introducing magic to achieve the same things. It's just our definition of the magic changes. It's not wizards, it's not witches, it's not massively-intelligent AIs, it's now some form of genetic engineering.

LM: I'm haunted by the situation in Lem's *Solaris* in which a woman is created out of the memory of her husband and she commits suicide because she can't stand living that way. I see this as a metaphor for what it means to be human.

JCG: Yes, you've hit it absolutely. I would say that what he was dealing about was the human condition and memory, and our capacity to love, and our capacity to regret, as much as anything to do with science in any sense. I haven't seen [Soderbergh's] new film, but [Tarkovsky's] old film I can just watch endlessly. I love the idea of somebody being given something by an entity that is not human. It's the ultimate form of kindness. He's trying to give him back what he wants.

LM: Although I think ultimately Kelvin, the protagonist, is more interested in the sentient planet than he is in the woman. A question that then arises is, does Kelvin have anything to offer the planet?

JCG: Company. A sense of purpose. My book about to be published, *Stamping Butterflies*, is more-or-less about that. It's about the relationship between one person and a totally different consciousness, and what they both bring to each other, and why, and the kind of misconceptions that can come out of that. It takes place in three time-lines. In 1977, the birth of punk, mostly in Marrakech; a few years from now on an island in the middle of the Mediterranean which is an American military base; and about fifty thousand years from now, on the other side of the galaxy. All the stories mesh, and it's about the past changing the future, but I also wanted to have the future change the past.



LM: So there are science fiction concepts in there: time travel, faster-than-light travel...



JCG: ...Generation ships, cryo-sleep. What happens if your entire crew is slowly rotting. What happens if someone budgets for artificial gravity and then the cost-cutters decide you're going to have to do without it at the last minute, but the ship has been designed as if it's had it. So you're kind of stuck with some rather strange angles for all the living quarters, because it was a good idea at the time, but when it came to it, you just knock that off the budget and hope people can cope with it.



LM: But you interweave these cybernetic conundrums into your convoluted story lines.



JCG: Someone once accused me of writing all the settings, all the plot narratives and all the clues, and then cutting them up and pasting them as if I just wrote everything out as little blocks and then stuck it all together afterwards into a narrative. But how it is on the page is how it is on the page. That's how it comes out. It just comes out fractured. I want all of the plot elements to mix together as seamlessly as they do in our lives. I think in the UK we're all trying to write books where that stuff interweaves. Where everything fits together, because that's how life is. Characters walk into your life and they walk out of your life, and you don't necessarily know what happens to them. We use machinery, and we don't necessarily know how it works, but we know it does work until it doesn't work, and we're stuck with the implications of that. Politicians make changes to our lives without us knowing, and then fifteen years down the line something happens in our lives that is predicated on something that happened when we were children.



LM: We consist of what is going on right now, but we also have our memories, our desires, our emotions, some of which we're in control of, some of which we have no knowledge of until they impinge on us in some bizarre way...



JCG: ...And we're endlessly rewriting our memories. And our futures, but in particular our memories. So that our memories of childhood are probably not our memories of childhood. They're an nth removed from the actual events that we have remembered and re-remembered and remembered and re-remembered, until what we remember probably has very little relationship to what there actually was. What really fascinates me is the idea that we are only in consciousness now. We're this point. We're a constant illusion of consciousness, this particular moment, thinking we can remember what was before. But what we have is this point. We tell ourselves we have future, we tell ourselves we have past, but we're probably rewriting both of those on an almost constant basis. One of the things I try to do is deal with the nature of identity. What constitutes your core. I'd like to think there is a core, but I'm not absolutely certain there is. A lot of the books are about people creating themselves. Raf has to create himself. He has to take ZeeZee, who is in himself a construct of whoever Raf was a child. Out of ZeeZee, the character who was in prison in Seattle for running with the Triads, he has to create Ashraf Bey. And out of the ashes of Ashraf Bey, Raf al-Mansur. He creates an identity, but he's



creating it as much for himself as he is to fool anybody within El Iskandryia, or to fool Hamzah or his aunt. He makes himself into Raf so he can protect Hani. And the reason Hani is so important is that Raf really has no identity, no real identity, until he has to protect somebody else. And the point at which he has to protect somebody else, he has to become somebody for himself. He has to stop being endlessly fluid and become at least an illusion of certainty, so the child has something to which to cling.

LM: So you're postulating an identity that is created existentially, on the fly...

JCG: ...I think we all create ourselves on the fly, as we go along. It's just easier to show it in a character than it is to sit back in your own life and deal with the fact that you've constantly, endlessly, recreated yourself on the fly for your entire life.

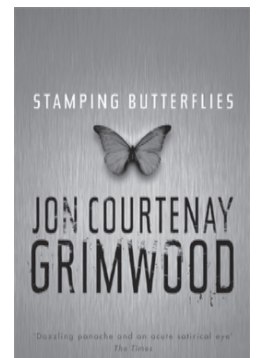
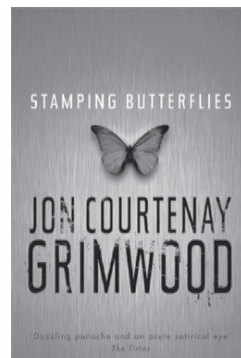
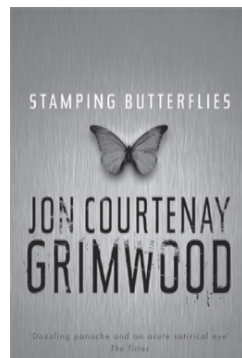
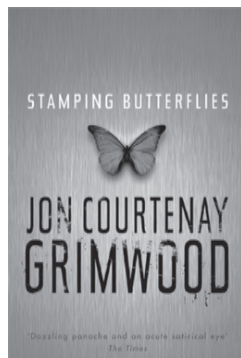
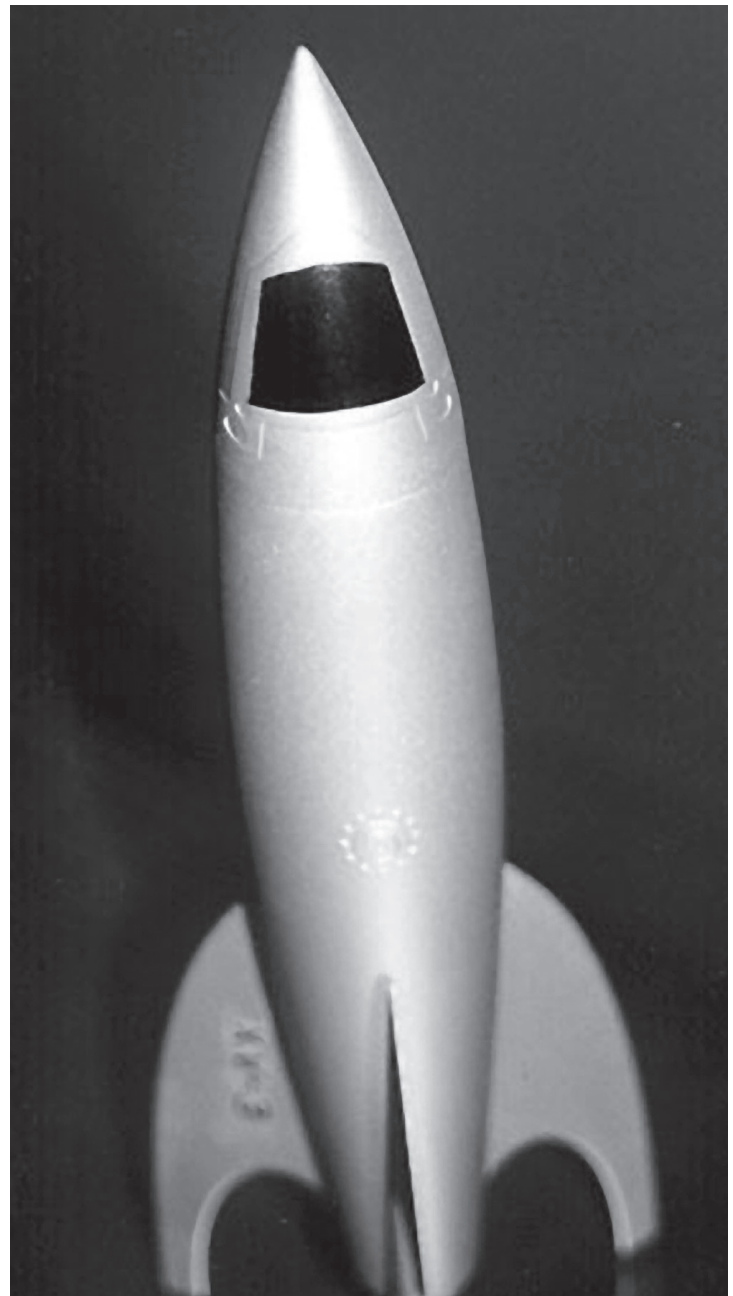
LM: But I wonder if such an idea would be accepted say a hundred years ago. At that point people thought of themselves as entities that were fixed, although they may have been deluding themselves.

JCG: No, I think identity was there. I really think that in the Victorian era, people knew who they were in a way that my generation and definitely my son's generation never will. We might have an idea, but it can change. Whereas I think if you were a Victorian paterfamilias who worked in a bank and had a wife and five children, a lovely house, you were that person. That was your identity.

LM: Unless you were Gaugin and walked away from it.

JCG: Yes, you might, but then you were insane. You were regarded by everybody as weak willed, as though this was a mental problem. I agree with you entirely. I think we've lost our sense of concrete identity. I'm not sure this is necessarily a bad thing.

The book I've just finished writing opens with a San Francisco cop being shot and coming back to investigate his own death, only to realize he doesn't recognize the person being described by those he interviews. So I'm back to what constitutes identity, but leavening the mix with murder, Russian oligarchs, sex, fox spirits and neurobiology. The novel is called *9 Tailed Fox*, and I delivered it to my UK publisher yesterday... I'm obviously delighted that Juliet Ulman at Bantam in New York is publishing the three Ashraf Bey books, and I'm really looking forward to finding out what American readers make of the main character!



INTERVIEW WITH CHINA MIEVILLE

by Loren Means

LM: Jon Courtenay Grimwood says that the fundamental difference between British and US science fiction is that British science fiction is written from a leftist perspective, and US science fiction is written from a right-wing perspective.

CM: I think that there's some truth to it, but I think it's very overstated. I can think of plenty of counter-examples. Think of Ursula LeGuin, think of Thomas Disch, think of Samuel Delany, think of Mack Reynolds. That said, taking it with a pinch of salt, it is very hard to think of a British science fiction writer who comes from a right-wing perspective. Whereas in the States, I think it's much more bifurcated, and that there's a much stronger tradition of right-wing or Libertarian SF or both. The later Robert Heinlein has a very big founding influence in the US. Whereas in Britain, the *New Worlds* tradition, which was very much about social concern and progressivism, is the founding moment of British SF. Obviously that's a silly thing to say, because there was lots of SF before that. But I think that was British SF's keystone moment, and that we are all now in Britain standing on their shoulders, and privileged to do so. At a larger cultural level, a right-wing position really has very little purchase on British SF, which it does in the States. If you go to a British convention and you throw a rock, you're very unlikely to hit a right-winger. And that's not the case in the States at all.

LM: Thinking back to the Reagan years, when science fiction writers had the ears of policy makers, that seems rather frightening.

CM: My impression is less that American SF is right-wing and British SF is left-wing, then that British SF is crudely left-wing, and American is split. And I think of the famous issue of *Galaxy* that had opposing ads on the Vietnam War. There was a two-page spread, and on one page there was an ad that said "We oppose the actions of our government in the Vietnam War," and there was a list of like LeGuin and Delany and various others. And on the opposing page, it was "We support the actions of our government in the Vietnam War," and it was Heinlein, Anne McCaffrey as I recall, various others. I suppose vaguely analogous would be something like "We support the actions of our government in the Iraq War." I can't think of a single British SF writer who you would get on that side of the page.

LM: The people I talked with in London seemed to be united in their opposition to Thatcherism and their relief that it's over, to the extent that it is.

CM: Yeah, good point. Thatcherism was extremely influential in British SF, retroactively. If you think of Thatcherism as basically the early triumph of neo-liberal policies in Britain, and Reaganism as the equivalent in the States, the clear literary result of that neo-liberalism in the States was Cyberpunk. It was a kind of dystopian, noirish, fetishized despair. I don't say this critically. I say it as a description. Much of it is brilliant stuff, but it's a glossed fetishization of societal collapse. In Britain, we didn't really kick off on Cyberpunk. We have some writers who draw from it, of course, but it wasn't the big thing there that it was in the U.S.. I think the main influence of Thatcherism in Britain was as a post-facto vindication of the New Wave. Because the New Wave in Britain was very much about collapse. It was a literature of decline and fall. The decline of the Sixties project, the decline of the great upsurge of potentiality and hope in the Sixties



and early Seventies. The quintessential New Wave moment is famously described as "Breakfast Among the Ruins." To that extent, New Wave foresaw the ruins that Thatcherism would leave. Ironically, although New Wave preceded Thatcherism, Thatcherism's big influence was as a vindication of that melancholic project. That's partly why I think we, the children of Thatcher, are so esthetically indebted to the *New Worlds* writers.

LM: We have something like that now in being united against Bush.

CM: Absolutely, but there's a difference in feeling, because one is united against Bush now. It's a moment. The thing with Thatcherism was that for a lot of writers in their thirties, we were just coming into political consciousness during Thatcherism, so that our sense of Thatcherism as a project is as much retrospective as it is in the moment. You made the good point that Blairism is essentially re-heated Thatcherism. Certainly a lot of British SF writers have nothing but contempt for Blair. But at a level of social project, we live in the ruins of Thatcherism, and it's that sense of living in the ruins of something that was done. Living in a post-social-apocalypse society is very formative to British SF. At a certain point that manifests in melancholy. And at certain points, increasingly recently, with the upsurge of the post-Seattle pro-democracy, grass-roots justice movement, it manifests as angry rejection. But a lot of British culture and quite a

lot of British SF has a sense of living in something that has already collapsed.

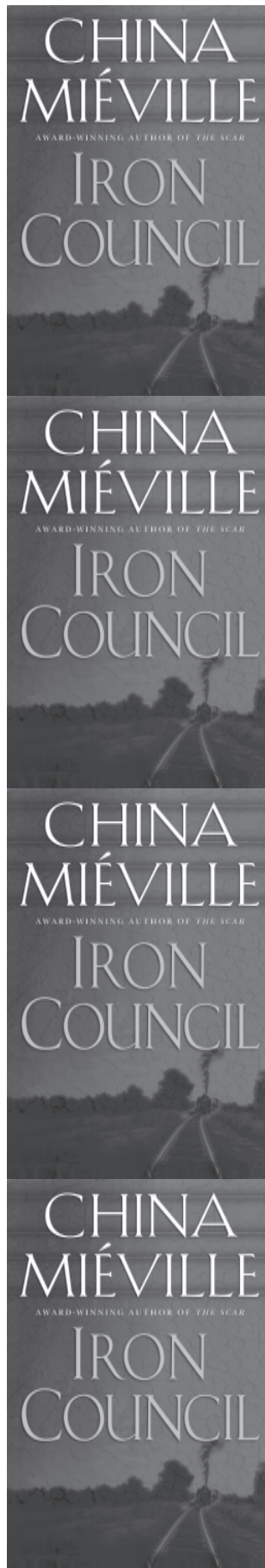
LM: But as a Marxist, you also have a utopian perspective as part of the dialectic, right?

CM: I don't mean any of that to sound socially despairing. I'm talking about at the level of the aesthetics of culture. I read the *New Worlds* writers, and I see the writing as melancholy. And I love it, and I think that that aesthetic is something fantastic. But what I respond to on an aesthetic level, that melancholic almost-despair, I don't respond to on a political level. At a political level, I feel neither melancholic nor despairing. You're quite right, there is a "utopian" element to socialist thinking. Essentially, we can imagine something different, or at least we can start to imagine something different. You're quite right that that's very important in my life and my fiction.

LM: I've often felt that the US left is condescended to by the European left because the US has never achieved socialism to the extent that the European left has. And I find that although in San Francisco I'm surrounded by leftists, I only hear Marx mentioned by English people.

CM: It's an interesting point. Marxism is hardly a majority currently even in Britain, but even if you just take the word "socialism", most people in Britain are not socialists. However, if you describe yourself as a socialist in Britain, no one is going to bat an eyelid. Whereas, in the States, it's much more of a dirty word, essentially. I know lots of American Marxists, but they tend to be academics. Not all, I know activists as well. It's certainly true that concepts of class and the Workers' Movement never inhaled so much in the US as they did in Europe. While I think you're right that to those of us in Europe, there's an unpleasant edge of condescension. The theories of American exceptionalism and "America is not like Europe, its working class just can't get it right", I don't have any truck for any of that. But there are cultural differences that one has to acknowledge and try and understand and try and work with. American leftism blurs more with American liberalism, and identity politics has been extremely important in the US, moreso than in Britain. Identity politics had some very, very important and progressive things to say, but it also can go in directions I have issues with. There's a different terrain to leftism in the States. I don't think that Britain or Europe in an easy and obvious way have the answer and is going to be the alternative. But I do hope that with the increasing radicalism we see, at the very least "socialism" will stop being a cuss word in the States. "Liberalism" is a cuss word to many people.

LM: In the States we have many science fiction writers who are scientists, and they seem to be-



lieve that science will save us. There seems to be a science-bias in US science fiction that doesn't exist to the same extent in British SF.

CM: We're talking about the distinction between hard and soft science fiction. Hard science fiction, science fiction that deals in sciences, and soft science fiction being that which specializes in the social sciences and is less concerned with the specifics of scientific fact. There are very good British science fiction writers who are interested in science. Most obviously Alistair Reynolds, and to some extent Richard Morgan, Justina Robson, although arguably from a more social perspective. And equally there are plenty of American writers of SF who don't come from a hard science background.

My problem with what I think of as this sort of extropian, futurist hope in science, is that I don't think science is anything, one way or the other. Science is neither progressive nor reactionary, in and of itself. It's what you do with it. The idea that "science," in inverse commas, will save us seems to me to simply raise more questions than it answers. Whose science? Science funded how? Science for what purpose? I'm not against genetic engineering at all. I think some of the left, liberal anxiety about genetic engineering is ridiculous. I think genetic engineering is fascinating, exciting technology. I'm not even against genetically engineering food, in the abstract. However, I am extremely nervous about genetic engineering research being funded by agri-business, whose priority is to make a profit, not to make nutritious food. If they can make nutritious food as well, then fine, but that's not what they're doing it for.

Parenthetically, I get extremely annoyed when people talk about how genetic engineering of food is going to solve the problems of food in the Third World. We already have enough food to feed everyone in the world. The problem is not that there isn't enough food. The problem is not that we need to increase the yield. The problem is that businesses don't want to get the food to the people who are hungry, because the people that are hungry don't have the money to pay for the food. That's a different problem. The point about science is that genetic engineering, nanotech, could be a fantastic tool for the betterment of humanity, or it could be what reduces us to a charred cinder. It depends entirely on what's done with it. Any talk about "science" in the abstract, as if it's a thing that exists outside of its social context, is just meaningless. There's nowhere to go with it. "Science" isn't going to do anything. Scientists funded certain ways, doing certain projects for certain things, are going to do things. It's the social context that matters.

LM: I asked Richard Calder about the so-called British "boom", and he indicated that it wasn't

exactly booming for him. He said: "There is certainly a lot of space opera being written at the moment, which always strikes me as exceedingly strange, because it is very retrogressive." I was surprised to hear him say that, and when I thought about it I realized that one of my favorite science fiction novels, Lem's *Solaris*, is something of a space opera.

CM: Absolutely. I'm slightly surprised Richard said that. I think there is a lot of space opera being written. There's a boom in space opera. A boom within the boom. Justina Robson is writing space opera, and of course Alistair Reynolds, and Mike [M. John] Harrison's *Light* is a space opera. I would tend to disagree with Richard, because I don't think anything is retrograde. For example, I am generally pretty critical of books with dragons and elves and dwarves in them, because I think they tend to be pretty dull and pretty clichéd. However, Michael Swanwick writes *The Iron Dragon's Daughter*, which is a towering, brilliant piece of work, all about dragons and elves and dwarves. I think anyone who says space opera is retrograde or High Fantasy is retrograde or whatever, is looking for trouble, because it can be, but it can also be done really, really interestingly. One of the things that's good at the moment is that so much of the new British—and probably American—space opera is taking a classic form, treating it with respect and love, but trying to do something interesting and new with it. One of these days I'd love to write a space opera.

LM: Critics seem to like to talk about "hybrids" and "heterotopias" in regard to your work. But it seems to me that the Twentieth Century was notable for its lack of consensus. I think orthodoxy is hard to come by any more, since everything seems to be in flux.

CM: I think that's right. I think one of the nice things about writing at the moment is that there are no rules. Generic boundaries are blurring, structures are blurring, the boundaries between mainstream and speculative fiction are blurring. The whole field of writing in general and SF in particular is becoming increasingly heterodox and heterogeneous, and I'm trying to think of other words with "hetero" in them—heterosexual? I agree, and I think that my stuff is obviously responding to that. Not at a conscious level. I don't sit there and say "Now I'm going to write a book about the heterogeneity of modernity," but yes, it's clearly drawing on that, I think.

LM: I enjoyed your story "Familiar", from the anthology *Conjunctions:39, The New Wave Fabulists*. The Familiar essentially makes itself out of disparate elements. That's also going on in your novels, these creatures that are constructed out of disparate elements that come together in new forms.

CM: I think I'm very much a magpie. When we say "magpie", we mean what you mean when you say "raccoon". You see glittery things and you grab them. I feel very much like a magpie writer. When I started writing the Bas-Lag books, I invented Bas-Lag partly as a forum to be allowed to do whatever I wanted, but it was a fantasy world which was going to be absolutely heterogeneous. Technologically heterogeneous, historically, biologically, magically, very, very variegated and wild. I conceived of it as a grab-bag of all kinds of stuff. I'm very interested in things coagulating out of wildly disparate elements. Bas-Lag is a coagulum of all kinds of shit. "Familiar", the story you're talking about, which I was very, very pleased with, very proud of, I wanted to take that idea and focus on it a bit, and set it in the real world to make the point more clearly, because the disparity is greater. To have something that self-organizes out of random discards and the clutter of everyday. I'm glad you liked it, because it was a story that was quite important to me.

LM: William Gibson was talking with me about London and the people like Iain Sinclair who are doing this deep geography...

CM: ...Psycho-geography...

LM: And I asked him if Vancouver was such a place, and he said, "No it's too new, but San Francisco is."

CM: Absolutely. And I like cities that one can do that in, cities that have a—to sound monstrously pretentious—a psycho-geographical hinterland. I think London, I think New York, I think Cairo, Havana, and I absolutely take your word, San Francisco has that feel to it. There is a San Francisco literature, isn't there? And certainly one of my favorite films of all time is *Vertigo*. One of the things I like about *Vertigo* is the way it does this really strange thing which is to create a feeling of absolute architectural uncanny and strangeness. It does it not by doing anything weird with the landscape of San Francisco, but by looking at it simply too precisely. It just follows everything very, very carefully. You have these long, winding journeys through the streets. The city becomes uncanny through its very physical existence. You couldn't do that with all cities. I doubt you could it with Vancouver, to take an example. But with San Francisco, it works brilliantly.

LM: It seems to me that as your work progresses, it reveals a growing emphasis on language.

CM: Certainly I've become even more conscious of language. I was acutely conscious in *Iron Council* at the level of language, at the level of sentence structure, word structure. There are sections of the book that aren't necessarily an incredibly easy read in language structure. That's deliberate. That's a risky strategy, because you can really alienate people. I understand that. You're right, that interest in language simply makes it a more interesting deal to try and play with it. I've never really bought the idea that language is best simply as a conduit for contact. It seems to me that in the best literature, language is also an end in itself. I think particularly in genre, we have a tradition of language that's clear like a pane of glass. There's a story behind it, and the language is just a glass window for you to look through to see the story. There are some writers who do that very, very well. There are books I love that are written in that tradition. But I'm interested in this sort of High Pulp tradition. You think of people like Lovecraft. Language is anything but a pane of glass. It's incredibly overwrought and rich, and at times it makes it difficult to read, but it's also, for all its manifold flaws, it makes it an interesting experience, because there's a relationship between the form of the language and the content of the words. And you're quite right, that I've been developing along that way.

LM: I knew nothing of horror until my sons introduced me to it because of their fascination with it. My wife is a psychotherapist, and was mortified by all this. But my young son believes that it's the people who don't play violent computer games that you have to watch out for.

CM: When I was very young, when I was about eight or nine, I read these horror comics called *Tales From the Dripping Crypt* and that sort of thing, and they were, in retrospect, incredibly grotesque and incredibly misogynist, and incredibly violent and horrible. And my mother, understandably, was somewhat put out, and she was a little bit worried about this. She didn't understand what it meant. And I have to say that I'm very glad I was into those things. I'm glad I was into them because I think if I hadn't been into them, I would find it very, very hard to empathize with anyone who is, and I think I'd get

freaked out like my mother did. I understand why people find it very, very disturbing. Having been very into that stuff when I was younger, and now I think most of that stuff is trash, but I remember vividly that sense of fascination with the sheer weirdness of these horrible comics. I'm glad, because I think it did allow me to not be freaked out by these instincts toward aesthetics that look pretty horrible from the outside. I don't think there's anything wrong or disturbing with being very into horror.

LM: In the Thirties, Socialist Realism was dominant, and then Trotsky got together with Andre Breton in Mexico and they issued a statement in *Partisan Review* that there should be artistic freedom. Do you see any leanings toward aesthetic orthodoxy on the left these days?

CM: I see elements of that in a very, very, very mediated way. Formally, everyone on the left agrees in the sort-of Trotskyist position that artistic freedom is crucial, and the best revolutionary art is not necessarily Socialist Realist. However, sometimes people on the left, almost without realizing it, start to say things like "It was a really good book, it was incredibly hopeful and gave you a really good sense of how workers can get together." And I always want to say, "That doesn't mean it's a good book." Ironically, that's a Stalinist notion of what makes a good book. On the other side, mainstream critics, who would never think of themselves as leftists, one of the reasons they tend to be so sniffy about fantasy and the fantastic in general, is out of this sort of patrician disdain for fiction which isn't engaging with "the real world". That is therefore "escapist", and that is therefore not quite socially relevant. Although they would not acknowledge this, that's a very Socialist Realist position. It's essentially a Stalinist position, except that it's a Stalinist position from the liberal middle-brow. That always amuses me, these people who would be aghast if you were to accuse them of being artistically philistine, and who are obviously huge fans of Magic Realism and Dada and all this. When it comes to generic fiction, they have this lumpen, old-school, prolet-cult position. I see the remnants of that argument. I don't think at a formal level. I think at a formal level we won that argument. That argument is dead and gone. But I think that some of this cultural detritus remains.



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LM: I tend to see virtuality as evidence that humanity is changing in some way. Don't you pose characters who are altered by technology?

RC: That did interest me, but more from a general idea that we all use masks. It's interesting to use masks fictionally. It's interesting to create a fictional world where masks are being used and stripped off all the time. But this is a literary concern rather than a technological concern. Writers I've been interested in who have used masks are people like Yeats, Ezra Pound, Robert Browning. It's the whole idea of using a first-person narrator and the problems that creates. What is it for an author to speak through a first-person narrator, speak through a mask? And in my novels, often masks are changed around, and the technology there is there to support that, to explain it, in part, to act as a metaphor. But it's not there as a premise. Because I think it's more of a long-term historical thing, more of a long-term literary thing, the use of masks, the problems of identity that that involves.

LM: And of course Freud brought in a whole new way of looking at identity. We never know for sure who we are, and we're always trying to find out.

RC: Yes, exactly. That is something that has been of prime interest. The novels are often quests. Sometimes they are overtly outward quests, but there is always the inner quest there, which is the important quest. The quest to find out, to discover a sense of identity, to reveal other people's true identities, if that is possible. To raise the question of if that is possible. What is a true identity, what is identity in the first place? And aren't we all lost, living in this world, in terms of who we are? In terms of personality slipping, reforming, dissolving, reforming.

LM: Sherry Turkle gave a presentation where she showed a picture of Ray Kurzweil's avatar, which reminded me of Primavera—it's a young female rock star. And now, since he always uses that avatar, he's identified with it—people know it's him. There's a fluidity about the way that people can present themselves in the world that wasn't there before.

RC: It's always been there in the respect that as soon as we tell stories, we can assume different identities, even if we use a third-person narrative. We can be all the people in that narrative. We can be a multitude of voices as well as a single voice. So I think it's a perennial human thing. Obviously with new technologies, there are new ways of doing things. New ways of using masks, of using selves, of projecting different selves and so on, but I do think it's something new in human nature. The point you made that human nature may fundamentally change over the next hundred years is valid, again, and may be something that's really going to happen, but through genetic engineering. I don't think through virtual reality. I think virtual reality will just be another way of doing things that we'll be doing already through literature, through drama, through poetry, through cinema, through all of these things. It will just be another art form, if you like, for exploring the human condition. But the idea that the human condition itself could change is something completely different, and is both exciting and extremely disturbing, of course. It may change to the degree that we may not want to write any more. We may not see the point in it.

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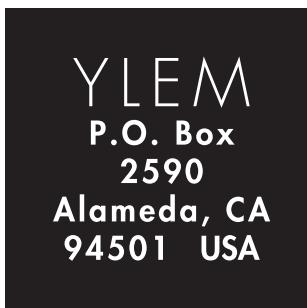
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n. pronounced eye - lem, 1. Greek: for the exploding mass from which the universe emerged

- the material of the universe prior to creation.

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